



A SOLDIER'S LIFE
ON THE WESTERN
FRONTIER IN 1813

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FOREWORD

The following letter, written by an anonymous author to an unknown correspondent, vividly depicts the life of an American soldier on the western frontier during the War of 1812. Reprinted from the WEEKLY REGISTER, this letter might have been written by a twentieth-century soldier, for the experiences, hopes, and fears of this enlisted man in the early nineteenth century are similar to those of an American serviceman of our own day. Hardships, sufferings, and dangers are illustrated; but good will, respect for authority, and companionship are present in no lesser degree. The letter is reprinted as published except that grammar, spelling, and punctuation have been changed to conform to current usage.



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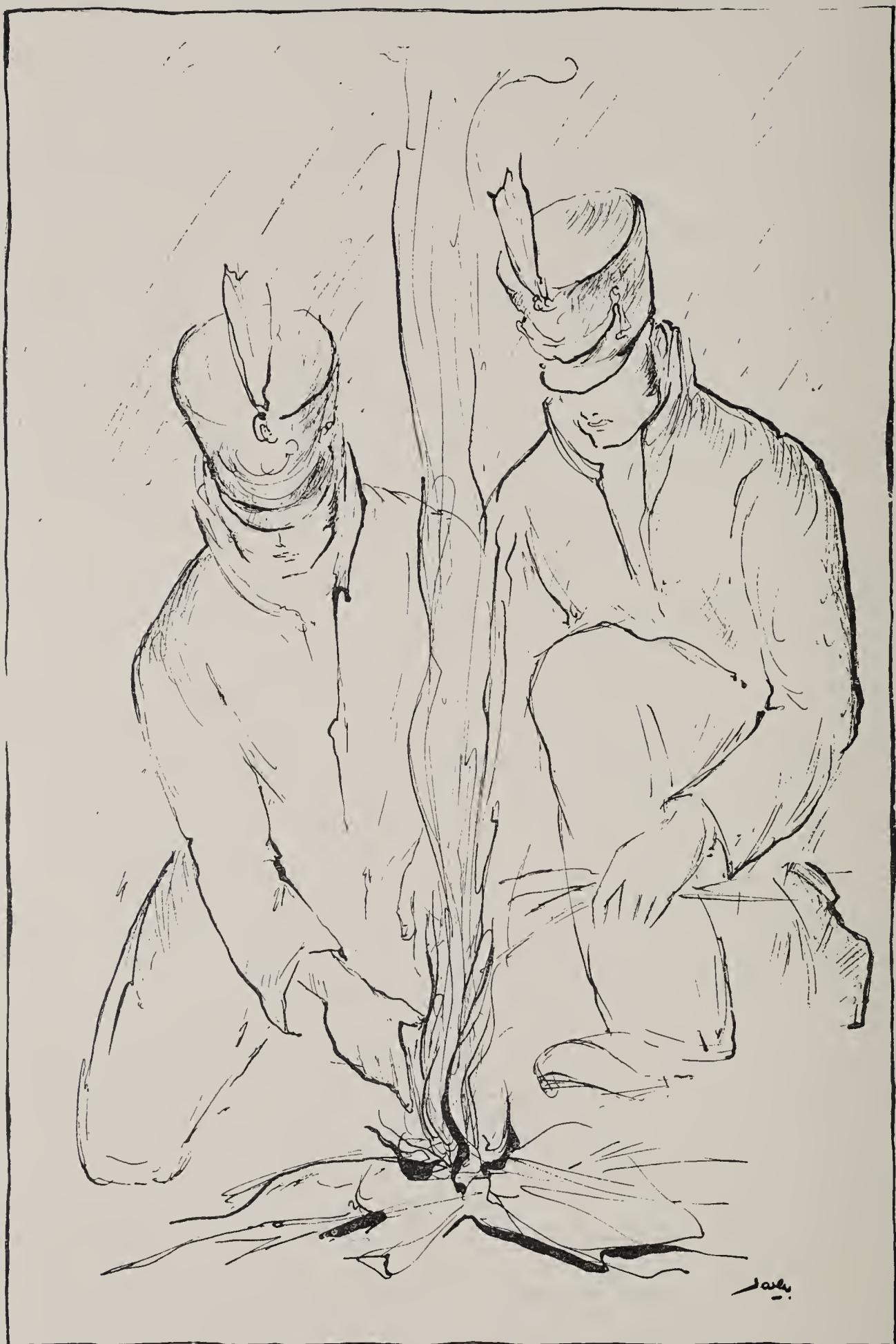
Zanesville, Ohio

March 28, 1813

When I last wrote you from Upper Sandusky, I confidently expected that something of considerable importance would have transpired within a very short time; but, unfortunately, the war in this quarter is protracted to a much longer period than I contemplated at that time. Indeed, the best-informed people in the army think that nothing decisive can be done before next winter. Invasions of a country with militia will never be successful. Some militiamen will not cross the lines; others will not submit to any kind of authority; and, in fact, they would all prefer being at home rather than courting fame on the battlefield.

The Kentucky and Ohio militia have been discharged for some time; the Pennsylvania and Virginia militia are to be discharged on April 1; and, unless other troops arrive, the camp will, in a great measure, be unprotected. No men will be left except our battalion, consisting of the Petersburg Volunteers and two companies from Pittsburgh (fifty men in one and fifteen in the other), together with about three hundred and fifty regulars. Ensign James G. Chalmers, who is appointed paymaster for all the twelve-month volunteers, and I left the rapids on the eighth. We have to remain here until the arrival of the district paymaster.

The next day after the date of my letter from Upper Sandusky, we left that place for the rapids, together with three hundred militia under the command of Major Orr. We had with us twenty pieces of heavy artillery and a



quantity of military stores of every description. At this time we knew nothing of the unfortunate events at the Raisin River. On the second day of our march, a courier arrived from General Harrison; the artillery was ordered to advance with all possible speed. This was rendered totally impossible by the falling snow; it was a complete swamp nearly all the way. On the evening of the same day, news arrived that General Harrison had retreated to the Portage River, eighteen miles in the rear of the encampment at the rapids. It was determined that as many men as could be spared should proceed immediately to reinforce him. It is unnecessary to state that we were among the first who wished to advance.

At two o'clock the next morning, our tents were struck; and in half an hour we were on the road. I will candidly confess that on that day I regretted being a soldier. We marched thirty miles in incessant rain; and I am afraid you will doubt my veracity when I tell you that in eight miles of the best road, we sank into mud over the knees and often to the middle. The Black Swamp (four miles from the Portage River and four miles in extent) would have been considered impassable by all except men who were determined to surmount every difficulty to accomplish the object of their march. In this swamp one loses sight of terra firma altogether. The water was about six inches deep on the ice, which was very rotten and often broke through to a depth of four or five feet.

That same night we encamped on very wet ground, but the driest that we could find; the rain still continued. It was with difficulty that we built fires; our clothes were wet. We had no tents, no axes, nothing to cook in,

and very little to eat. Since a brigade of pack horses was near us, we procured some flour from them; we killed a hog as there were plenty of them along the road. Our bread was baked in the ashes, and the pork we broiled on the coals. A sweeter meal I have never eaten. When we went to sleep, it was on two logs laid close together to keep our bodies from the damp ground. Good God! What a pliant being is man in adversity. The loftiest spirit that ever inhabited the human breast would have been tamed amid the difficulties that surrounded us.

The next morning we arrived at the headquarters of the northwestern army on the Portage River. During our stay here, we were in constant expectation of an attack. For several nights we went to sleep with our muskets in our arms and all our accoutrements fixed for action. On the arrival of the brigades of General Leftwich and General Crook [sic] from Sandusky, we marched for the rapids. The Kentucky and the Ohio troops had then only six days to serve. In a speech to them, the General pledged to take them to Malden in twenty days, which pledge would have been fulfilled if the cannon and military stores could have been got on. When we arrived at the rapids, the advance guard discovered that one of the three persons, who had been sent to Malden with a flag two days previously, had been killed and scalped by the Indians. The other two (we have since heard) are prisoners at Malden. So little does our enemy respect the laws of nations.

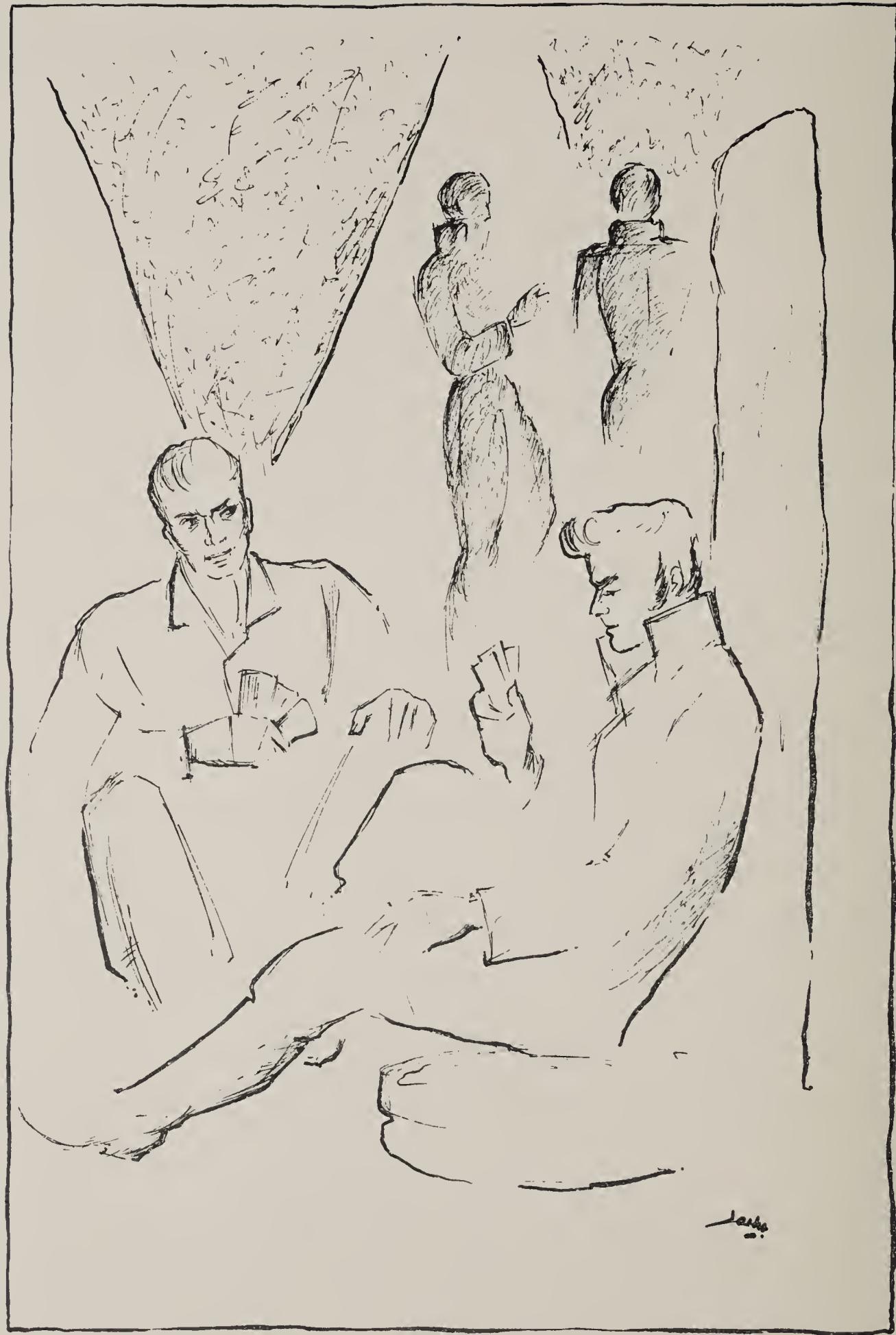
The encampment, protected by nature in three quarters by a steep, high bank, is opposite the Michigan Territory in a fine situation; the whole is picketed. The stores are deposited in eight blockhouses, built around

the picketing. All of the encampment is nearly in a complete state of defense. The handsomest country along this river is in the vicinity of the camp, but all is a scene of desolation. After Hull's surrender, the whole country was laid waste by the Indians. Every half mile there had been a house; the only remaining indication of habitation is the ruins that cover the ground where houses once stood!

A few days after our arrival, a detachment, of which our company was a part, was sent out to attack a considerable party of Indians fifteen miles down the river. We started as night set in and marched all the way on the ice. About two o'clock we came near the place where we expected to surprise the enemy. We were put in order of battle and instructed to proceed in silence.

"Still was the pipe and drum--
Save heavy tread, and armor's clang,
The sullen march was dumb."

In a few minutes enemy forces were in sight; they were nearly a mile off in a bend of the river. When we were within gunshot (I could hear the men cocking their pieces), our company, to a man, was even at that moment cheerful and gay! Fear was far distant from our ranks; and I do sincerely believe that, had the enemy not flown previous to our arrival, we would all have realized the expectations of our friends. Some of their spies (as we have since heard from prisoners from Malden) saw us on our march, and as a consequence they made a precipitate retreat. We followed them to within five miles of the Raisin River and returned to camp without any rest, except for two hours. We were absent twenty-one hours, during which



time we marched more than sixty miles. You are already acquainted with the particulars of the last unfortunate account at the Raisin River, likewise the failure of the expedition to destroy the "Queen Charlotte." Our company marched as far as the mouth of Lake Erie to reinforce the men of the first party, but we met them on their return. We have all built small houses, which make us very comfortable, in front of the tents.

The camp duty is very severe; there are no tents or houses for the guard when the men are off their posts, so that it is equally as pleasant for them to be at their posts as off. They are forbidden to leave the rendezvous of the guard. Every other day a man mounts guard; on the day that intervenes, he is at work within the camp. Major Alexander, who commands the battalion, is as fine a fellow as I ever knew. The most perfect harmony exists between the Pittsburgh company and ours; they are the only two companies of twelve-month volunteers in camp, and the only companies that wear uniforms. A generous emulation exists between them, which is of infinite service to both. Officers and men all mingle together. We visit each other's tents of an evening, sing, tell stories, play music, and drink grog when we can get it (which, by the bye, is not often the case; sutlers are not permitted to sell spirits in the camp).

Poor Edmund S. Gee is no more! I saw him breathe his last. We consigned him to his mother earth with all the decency our circumstances would permit. We had it not in our power to dress his corpse in all the pomp and pageantry of sorrow. The tears of his companions, more eloquent than all the parade that sable weeds could bestow, were his due; and

those he had! All the battalion attended the funeral, as did General Leftwich, who requested the chaplain to perform a funeral service, a thing not done on any similar occasion.

Chalmers and I will return to the camp in a few days. It is dangerous to travel the roads in small parties, as the Indians are all around the camp. We will be obliged to remain in the settlement until some troops are going on. The day before we left the camp, a lieutenant was shot and scalped within sight of the camp. Another man was shot at, but fortunately in his side pocket he had a Bible, which arrested the course of the ball and saved his life. There are one hundred miles of road between here and the rapids without a single inhabitant--all a wilderness.

WEEKLY REGISTER, May 8, 1813

